DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY
State of Washington

News Release

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You found what in the storm drain?

Investigators identifying misconnected pipes in work to curb runoff pollution

YAKIMA – As they survey their stormwater systems under the state's new stormwater regulations, cities and counties throughout Central and Eastern Washington are finding that some pipes are not hooked up to the sewer, but are instead carrying untreated waste directly to a river or stream.

For instance, in Wenatchee, toilet paper and sanitary waste was found in a storm drain manhole on a middle school property. Dye testing and video inspection confirmed that student and faculty bathrooms and other facilities were connected to the stormwater system, not to the city's sewer. Also in Wenatchee, wastewater from a packing house was found to be discharging to a storm drain outfall to the Columbia River.

In Yakima, city and county officials have found sewage waste from homes, taverns, warehouses and even a local hospital misconnected to the stormwater system. The discoveries were made when public works staff injected smoke into the pipe to identify and eliminate any improper connections and discharges to surface water.

One Eastern Washington university found its field house drains and swimming pools among other things, were not properly hooked up to the sewer system.

Ultimately, these finds will improve the area's water quality. Corrections have already been made at many of the sites, the entities report.

"Now that communities are mapping their storm drains we're finding that in older and historic parts of communities mistakes were made – even with hookups from new construction," explained Terry Wittmeier, municipal stormwater permit manager with the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology). "These discoveries are helping us to nip pollution from making its way to rivers and streams."

Stormwater runoff is the state's largest source of pollution to urban waters, carrying a mix of bacteria and chemicals downstream into the state's lakes, rivers and marine waters.

Reducing stormwater pollution is a high priority of the state as Ecology and local communities tackle cleaning up hundreds of rivers, lakes and streams, and marine waters.

For instance, large investments are being made to reduce phosphorus and other pollutants to the Wenatchee, Spokane and Walla Walla rivers.

Farmers have made headway in reducing pesticide and silt runoff from farmland where they have moved away from flood irrigating their fields to using sprinklers and drip methods. Water clarity has improved by 80 percent in the Yakima River where farmers have made irrigation improvements.

Still, a number of rivers and streams test high for fecal coliform bacteria and toxic chemicals. The fecal bacteria can come from sewer misconnections, failing septic systems and animal waste. Toxic chemicals can be found in street grime, pesticides and herbicides, and other historical activities like mining that have left a legacy of pollution in the environment.

"We'll only be successful cleaning up our waterways if we can stop pollution at its source," said Kelly Susewind, Water Quality program manager for Ecology. "Over the years, cities and industries have made big improvements in treating their wastewater. It's these mystery hookups and runoff from our streets and lands that are now among the greatest source of pollution."

Ecology understands what it's like to learn that your building isn't properly connected to a sewer system. Last year, the agency was surprised to find that part of the building it leases for its Vancouver field office was connected to a storm drain rather than a sewer line.

Susewind said, "The good news about these discoveries is that the municipal stormwater permits are doing their job of helping us find problems and correct them."

Cities and counties are developing and implementing stormwater management programs as part of requirements under the federal Clean Water Act. Grant money passed through from the state is helping to support the programs.

In 2009, the Legislature authorized $9 million in new grant funding to help local governments to successfully meet the terms of their municipal stormwater permits. About 107 local governments covered by Ecology's stormwater permit received $50,000 each to help run their programs, totaling some $5.35 million. Another 15 communities of regional or statewide significance shared $3 million in grants.

Those receiving grants include the cities of Yakima, Sunnyside, Union Gap, Selah, Ellensburg, Wenatchee, and East Wenatchee, as well as Yakima, Chelan, and Douglas counties. Also included are Richland, West Richland, and Kennewick in Benton County, and Pasco in Franklin County, and Moses Lake in Grant County. Others include Walla Walla, Clarkston and Asotin counties in southeastern Washington.

Wenatchee, in partnership with East Wenatchee, Chelan and Douglas counties, is establishing the Wenatchee Valley IDDE (Illicit Discharge Detection and Elimination) Program. The partners will use $77,000 to develop a cache of materials for use by residents, businesses and schools to address stormwater discharges. The project partners will conduct field testing, purchase spill response equipment, and car wash kits for charity fund-raising events. Another $100,000 to the partnership will be used for training and to develop an operations and maintenance template that also will be made available to others.

Yakima County recently was awarded $226,400 to create a manual describing methods for low-impact development, and to conduct a demonstration project to study porous materials that might reduce runoff from pavement.

More information on other stormwater programs is available online at:
http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/stormwater/municipal/index.html

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